

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT FOR BUDGET HEARING
February 16, 2005

I want to welcome everyone here to what might be seen as the official opening of budget season for the House Science Committee. I am pleased to say that we will be hearing this morning from most of the top science officials in the federal government.

I am especially gratified to welcome Secretary Bodman here this morning. His presence here signals the new cooperative, science-oriented leadership he will be bringing to the Department of Energy (DOE). I know that we will have the same productive relationship with Sam Bodman at DOE that we did when he was Deputy Secretary of Commerce, and I'm pleased to have him back in this Committee's orbit.

But while I am delighted to have so much talent arrayed before us this morning, one would hardly describe the tone of this morning's hearing as "festive." The budget proposal before us raises serious questions about our nation's direction in the coming years.

While the President's budget proposal for R&D (research and development) can legitimately be seen either as a glass half full or a glass half empty, no one could describe it as a glass that is filled enough to satisfy the nation's thirst for scientific advancement.

Let me elaborate.

The budget is a glass half full in that R&D as a whole has fared better, and basic research has fared no worse, than non-defense domestic discretionary spending as a whole. In other words, it would be unfair to describe the attitude behind this budget as in any way "anti-science." We are living through a period of stringent austerity, and the science budget reflects that rather than any hostility toward science.

There are also some grace notes in the otherwise dirge-like tone of the budget. The National Science Foundation (NSF) gets one of the largest increases in the budget, although not enough to keep pace with inflation, especially after the Coast Guard transfer is subtracted. And the internal laboratories of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), a top priority for this Committee, would receive a 12 percent increase.

But this budget is also a glass half empty. Key science agencies, most notably perhaps DOE's Office of Science, would see their budgets cut. NSF education programs would be cut by 12 percent – about as misguided a policy as one could imagine. I should say Congress tried going down this foolhardy path with regard to NSF in the early 1980s and quickly reversed course.

And perhaps most disturbingly of all, the outlook for the outyears seems to be more of the same.

Now, I don't doubt that science growth will have to be restrained in this budget environment. We might have to eliminate some programs, such as the oil and gas research programs the Administration has targeted.

But I think we have to think long and hard about whether it is in the long-term interest of the United States to have a multi-year period of real dollar cuts in spending on R&D. And we also have to think more clearly about what our priorities are in a period of restrained growth – a topic I'll be returning to at tomorrow's hearing on NASA's budget.

With so much at stake, I'm eager to turn to our witnesses – although they may no longer feel so eager themselves. I understand that each of them has devoted large portions of their careers to creating a healthy, effective federal science establishment. It's our job to help them get more “wallet” to go with their “will” – to hearken back to a phrase from the first President Bush.

Let me just end on a more positive note. For us to review the budget effectively, we need the maximum amount of information from the Administration. In the past, one of our frustrations has been getting accurate numbers for what was being spent on the inter-agency high performance computing program, another of this Committee's priorities. Dr. Marburger and Josh Bolten and I had a flurry of correspondence on this last year.

I'm pleased to say that this year those numbers arrived here on time, as required by law. So I want to thank Dr. Marburger and his staff and the staff at OMB and the relevant agencies for working cooperatively with us on this. It will make all our jobs easier, and it reflects the great working relationship we have, even as we may disagree on some budget decisions. So, please communicate my thanks to all involved with that.

Mr. Gordon.